

Best practices for the rehabilitation of girls in street situations in Sierra Leone

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Good Afternoon. I would like to thank the Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice (IIMA), Misiones Salesianas Madrid and all those who have organized and co-sponsored this event entitled "Girls with no name". I would like to acknowledge the presence of the First Lady of Sierra Leone and all those who are participating in this side event. By just being here you are giving to these invisible girls not only a name, a face, and a voice and by doing so you are helping them to regain their dignity.

In Don Bosco Fambul we care for children and their rights. We use to say: "It pains us when it pains them". Since 1998 Don Bosco Fambul has been working in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, caring for children and young people at risk: boys in street situation, Ebola orphans, abused girls and young people who are in conflict with the law.

Our work with girls living in a situation of prostitution started in 2016. We were doing street work with 25 social workers and we discovered that a big number of very young girls, as young as 9, were doing prostitution on the streets of Freetown. Listening to their stories was heart breaking: many were victims of early marriage, some suffered physical and emotional abuse, many were victims of trafficking, and a number were Ebola orphans. They used to sell their bodies in the streets of Freetown in order to get something to eat or to pay their schools fees.

In that moment I realized that we had to do something immediately for these girls. Thus, the **Girls Shelter Plus programme** was born. It was a holistic programme with the child rights approach. It was not born on a desk and behind a computer but on the streets, observing the girls, listening to their life stories, asking them questions, persuading them, proposing to them higher aims in life, inviting them to dream with something greater than the streets, something higher and bigger than prostitution. What was the strategy we took?

First of all, we approached them with loving kindness and empathy to break the barrier of mistrust because they had a very negative experience of being used and abused. More importantly, they felt not judged but accepted and trusted. We kept on repeating to them: "it is not your fault", "you can re-start again", "do not give up", "what is your dream?"

In Don Bosco Fambul we wanted these girls to feel that they are special and to experience unconditional love which expects nothing in return for in the streets they were beaten, sexually and verbally abused: "you are a prostitute; you are useless, you are bad, you are lost, you are hopeless". Instead in Don Bosco Fambul we made them feel that they are beautiful masterpieces that came from God's hands. One of them told me: "it is the first time in my life that somebody assured me that God loves me". Those words were music for her ears.

Don Bosco on Wheels is another programme we offer in Don Bosco Fambul. It consists of a modified bus which is a clinic, a classroom, a recreational playground, and a refectory. Every night 15 social workers go to the streets and the places where the girls live, work and sleep such as night clubs, slums, streets, and touristic areas. In these places we identify the most vulnerable girls. We socialize with them so as to gain their trust. We offer them a warm plate of food, recreation, medical care, HIV and Hepatitis B testing, workshops on human sexuality, sexual transmitted diseases, illegal migration, etc. We invite the younger ones, the sick and those who are pregnant to join the **Girls Shelter Plus** for a closer follow up.

In the Shelter we respond to their basic needs for food, clothing, health care, recreation, and spiritual and moral support. Medical attention is crucial: 100% of the girls who have been welcomed at the shelter have sexual transmitted diseases; 12% are HIV positive. Many have

Hepatitis B and TB. Several of them have 3 or 4 diseases at the same time. Some of them needed reconstructive surgeries due to injuries in their reproductive organs.

Caring for their emotional needs is as vital as caring for their physical needs inasmuch as these girls are deeply hurt and are in need of psychosocial support and trauma healing. Our social workers carry out counselling sessions, debriefing and group sharing where they can open their hearts and share their experiences. It is precisely in that moment when true healing starts.

Family tracing and reunification is one of the main aim of Girls Shelter Plus. It is our firm belief that reunification with their biological, extended or foster families complete the processes of growth and healing. For those girls who cannot be reunited with their families we have created another programme called **Group Homes where** 8 to 10 girls live in a rented house with a social worker.

The key towards real transformation is education and skills training. The younger ones return to school, they get inserted in the formal system of education, in primary and secondary School. Those who cannot get re-inserted in the school system do skills training. After graduation our job placement office helps them to find employment, to become self-employed or to start their own small business.

There are more than 1,500 girls doing prostitution on the streets of Freetown. Since we started the **Girls Shelter Plus** programme 163 of them have left the streets and joined their families. The majority have returned to school or are doing vocational training. Our target is to get 900 girls out of the streets in the next 3 years. This programme will be called **Hope Plus** and will start in July 2018.

What is the way forward to end this social evil? Prevention is as important as intervention! First of all, we have to stop looking at these girls as a problem but as children who have their rights. Secondly, we are giving more importance to the family, to the education of parents. We are working hard in the re-education of men on the way they treat women and girls in Africa. We promoting the re-training of security forces, especially the police, on the protection of the rights of these girls. We are trying our best to protect the most vulnerable girls from abusers, pimps and mafias.

Today, our Sierra Leonean girls are becoming more visible. The 150 million girls who are involved in child prostitution are acquiring a face. The one million children who are trafficked and sexually enslaved every year are getting names. They are recovering their dignity. Don Bosco's little contribution starts to make a difference.

Let me end with an image taking from football. Let us put on the jersey of solidarity and kick the ball forward as a team, until we score the most beautiful goal in the history of humanity: that of defeating permanently child trafficking and child prostitution, the worst form of child labour in the world.

Thank you all!